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PROGRESS OF THE AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAM

A radio interview between F. F. Elliott, Director of A.A.A. Program Planning Division, and M. L. Dumars, Press Section, A.A.A. broadcast Tuesday, September 28, 1937, in the Department of Agriculture period, National Farm and Home Hour.

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U. S. Department of Agriculture

DU MARS:

Today the Agricultural Adjustment Administration brings us another report on the plans that farmers and Triple-A people have worked out for 1938. Last Tuesday Mr. Tolley and Mr. Stedman gave this audience a birds-eye picture of the whole program. They mentioned land restoration in the Great Plains. This land restoration we study more completely today with Mr. F. F. Elliott, Director of the Triple-A Program Planning Division. Mr. Elliott, will you tell the listeners what you mean by land restoration?

ELLIOTT:

Native grass, Du Mars, that's the main thing. The 1938 Conservation Program will increase the emphasis on replacing crops with grass in parts of the Great Plains.

DU MARS:

Emphasis on growing grass on land now used for cultivated crops.

ELLIOTT:

Or on land farmers have plowed up in recent years and haven't put back to grass--whether the land's under cultivation right now or not.

DU MARS:

In other words, return to grass what belongs in grass.

ELLIOTT:

Right. Man has upset Nature's balance, and Nature has a way of resenting such things forcefully. There's an old saying in politics that applies to the forces of Nature too: If you can't lick 'em, jine 'em.

DU MARS:

And so we're trying to shape a program that will enable us to live with Nature instead of trying to fight her.

ELLIOTT:

Yes. Those who developed the plains tried to lick Nature. They engaged in systematic exploitation of the soil. The present generation is now paying the bill. The problem is to undo these past mistakes and seek to restore the balance through conservation.

DU MARS:

Well, Mr. Elliott, we know Nature has kicked up an awful fuss in part of the Great Plains. It shows up in the soil; it shows up in the income and the lives of the people who live there; and it shows up in our national economy.

(over)

ELLIOTT:

Yes, M.L., Nature is kicking so hard, it even jars the people in the eastern cities--believe it, or not.

DU MARS:

I'll believe it, but suppose you explain the state of affairs to the listeners, as briefly as you can.

ELLIOTT:

All right, first, let's locate the area. We'll take a map of the United States, and draw a big V to show the region. Here's one side of the V. Start up here at the Canadian border about the middle of North Dakota and draw the Eastern boundary down through South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas and thru Texas but not quite to the gulf. Now connect this point with the Western line following the Rocky Mountains from New Mexico through Montana.

DU MARS:

If memory serves me, most of the country in that V is relatively dry, windy, and hot in the summer--but has very rich soil.

ELLIOTT:

Very productive soil when there's water enough, but fine-grained so it blows around unless it's tied down with vegetation.

DU MARS:

To understand this country and its problems better, we need to know its past. How about that?

ELLIOTT:

Weather cycles tell the story in large part. The plains had a big wet period right after the Civil War. People were eager to move westward. And they had lots of encouragement. Railroads owned a great deal of land that they wanted to sell. The States also had land-grant script to sell, and the federal government had its homestead policy and sales of public land. Wet years and good harvests made the people optimistic. They thought the wet years would continue.

DU MARS:

So they tried to farm just like they did in the regions they came from.

ELLIOTT:

Not only that. The Government required the homesteaders to plow the land, whether it was suited to cultivation or not. If they didn't, they couldn't prove up on their claims.

DU MARS:

The size of the homesteads--that was another thing.

ELLIOTT:

Yes. The size was too small. For years, you couldn't get more than 160 acres, and we know that sized farm is far too small to support a family in that general area.

DU MARS:

Finally, though, the government increased the size of the homesteads.

ELLIOTT:

Yes, but not until most of the good land was taken up.

DU MARS:

The cattle industry influenced the land too, didn't it?

ELLIOTT:

Yes, it did. Fences, cultivation, and drought helped cause over-grazing on the ranges, and the range progressively declined both in quality and carrying capacity. But we haven't mentioned one of the biggest influences on the Great Plains.

DU MARS:

The World War, of course.

ELLIOTT:

The World War, and wheat. Power machinery, and wheat.

DU MARS:

Well, we were in the war from 1917 'til near the end of 1918.

ELLIOTT:

Wheat production hit a peak in 1919. Inflation came along with the war and pushed wheat prices to new high levels. There was a big demand, and wheat was naturally the main cash crop in the Great Plains. It was no wonder that wheat production went up.

DU MARS:

Then the war ended.

ELLIOTT:

The war ended, and many people cut their wheat acreages. But 1924 brought a new up-surge in wheat production.

DU MARS:

Power machinery this time.

ELLIOTT:

Combines that harvest and thresh the grain in one operation--general purpose tractors, one-way plows, and so on. Farmers bought all these new and efficient machines adapted to big-scale operations. They had to grow cash crops--mostly wheat--to pay for the machinery and keep it up. They expanded the wheat acreage and set about to make the plains the bread-basket of the world.

DU MARS:

Foreign countries were still good customers for United States wheat.

ELLIOTT:

Well, we were exporting a lot, but remember we were lending money to people abroad so they could buy our wheat.

DU MARS:

Then came the well-known depression.

ELLIOTT:

Depression and price collapse. People in this country got to the point where they couldn't go on lending abroad. People abroad couldn't buy any longer. We refused to take their goods in exchange for our products-- self sufficiency was the order of the day.

DU MARS:

But we kept right on producing huge amounts of wheat.

ELLIOTT:

Yes. The wheat train was going so fast by that time that the farmer couldn't get off. He had expanded his acreage. He had bought big-scale machinery. He had gone in debt, like virtually everybody does when he's expanding his business. And he had to get money to keep going.

DU MARS:

So he had to grow more and more for less and less.

ELLIOTT:

Yes.

DU MARS:

That was bound to hurt the land.

ELLIOTT:

Bound to. The condition of the land now reflects the mistakes of the past. Let me tell you about a recent study made in the southern part of the Great Plains. The Resettlement Administration found that 20 per cent of the land there is idle or abandoned. That doesn't take into account the land on which crops were planted and failed. They covered 12 1/2 million acres in this survey.

DU MARS:

1931 was the last good crop in that part of the country, as I remember.

ELLIOTT:

That's right. And I suppose everybody knows about the dust storms. The wheat craze, speculation, overgrazing, shallow plowing, and other mistakes have left their history in soil that's exposed to the weather and in a misused water supply.

DU MARS:

At any rate, the region now faces the multiple problems of soil blowing, soil washing, depletion of the water supply, and present day-to-day needs of the people, who are trying to make a living.

ELLIOTT:

All of those.

DU MARS:

The question is--what to do about those problems.

ELLIOTT:

Restore part of the land to grass--that's one thing. The Soil Conservation Service recently studied 20 counties, including 8 million acres. They recommend that half of the cultivated land in those counties should be returned to grass.

The Triple-A program will help Great Plains farmers pay the cost of doing some of this work during 1938.

DU MARS:

That won't solve the whole problem, though.

ELLIOTT:

No, it won't. But that isn't all that's being done. The Department of Agriculture is coordinating the work of all its agencies in the Great Plains. Solving the problem involves some land-purchasing by the government, better directed use of government credit, organization of conservation districts to protect the land and water supplies. Other things too.

DU MARS:

Then the Triple-A program in the Great Plains is one part of the coordinated effort.

ELLIOTT:

That's right. The 1938 Agricultural Conservation Program will offer farmers 50 cents an acre to help restore cover on part of the land. To earn this payment, they must protect not only the restoration land but the other land as well. One field of blowing land, you know, will wreck other fields.

DU MARS:

At any rate, you're making the land restoration work fit in with other programs in the area.

ELLIOTT:

Yes. Farmers in the Great Plains say they are eager to do this work. To be sure, they won't change the country over night. But by restoring grass, by protecting the water resources, and by related means, they'll win eventually. Then America will point with pride to the country that slipped--and then came back.

DU MARS:

Thank you. Farm and Home listeners, you have heard Mr. F. F. Elliott telling how the Triple-A conservation program fits in with other efforts to improve serious conditions in the Great Plains. The Triple-A urges farmers in that region to study the land restoration features of the 1938 program.

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